

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of Richard M. "Pek" Gunn,
Tennessee Poet Laureate.

WHEREAS, it was with a profound sense of loss that the members of this body learned of the death of one of our most cherished citizens, Richard M. "Pek" Gunn, a man of humble origins who, through hard work and accomplishment, became the longtime, honored and distinguished Poet Laureate of Tennessee; and

WHEREAS, "Pek" had the unique ability to take his listener back to his childhood days, growing up in the close-knit community he later immortalized, Tumblin' Creek, located approximately 60 miles west of Nashville; and

WHEREAS, it was in that community that Pek and his family of three brothers and four sisters learned life's most important lessons expertly taught by Christian parents, lessons that he deftly incorporated into his stories and poetry for more than half a century; and

WHEREAS, born with brilliant red hair, Pek's friends at school said he looked like a woodpecker, and when a childhood sweetheart started calling him "Pek" the name became an important part of the legend he created; and

WHEREAS, he loved poetry as a child, especially the poems of such writers as Longfellow and Scott, but he developed his own dynamic style, using the language of the common man and woman. He summed up his approach to writing by stating, "I'd rather take simple words and paint pretty pictures that will gladden the hearts of those who have long since ceased to smile, and die unknown as a writer, than to have the acclaim of the literary world with everyone trying to figure out what I had in mind when I wrote."; and

WHEREAS, Pek loved to make people laugh and had a tremendous talent for doing so. He discovered this gift at an early age when he would entertain eager listeners for hours with stories of life in Tumblin' Creek; and

WHEREAS, it was not long before he and his wife, Aunt Frances (Thompson) Gunn, were appearing at club meetings across Middle Tennessee, with Pek speaking and his wife performing a hilarious routine known as "the nervous politician"; and

WHEREAS, at a Nashville fire station where he worked, the fire chief would frequently send Pek out to make after-dinner talks; his reputation as a humorist and speaker increased rapidly; and

WHEREAS, in 1962, he was appointed director of prison services for the state Department of Correction. He developed a model crime prevention program that trained prisoners to make speeches on how smaller crimes lead to greater ones to high school and college students. This exemplary program was adopted by the United States Department of Justice and was presented to more than 600,000 young people; and

WHEREAS, with confidence and knowledge of his interest and ability, Governor Frank Clement later appointed him as the Executive Secretary of the first Tennessee Alcoholism Commission, a post he held admirably for almost five years. His highly regarded programs won praise from state, national and international leaders in the field; and

WHEREAS, a close personal friend of Billy Graham and the members of his evangelistic team, he coordinated 18 trainloads of persons going from Tennessee to Graham crusades in the United States and Great Britain; and

WHEREAS, among his numerous accomplishments was the writing of two very popular books: *Tumblin' Creek Tales* and *Keep on Laughing*, acclaimed by many of the leading writers and educators of the nation; and

WHEREAS, his books and framable prints of some of his best-loved poems may be found in a special rack at Crackle Barrel Country Stores, along interstate highways, at state parks and in numerous Tennessee bookstores; and

WHEREAS, Pek gave the name of "Little Mischief" to the Tennessee state animal, the raccoon, in a poem he wrote; and

WHEREAS, he also wrote an excellent marching song, "*The Tennessee Salute*" that became the official Tennessee Bicentennial March by Senate Joint Resolution 19 of the Eighty-Ninth General Assembly; and

WHEREAS, Pek evinced his unending faith, even in times of trouble, as a valued 60-year member of Nashville First Nazarene Church, where he was a favorite with each of the members and, in particular, the children, who were always ready for a kind word and a piece of bubble gum; and

WHEREAS, he was appropriately named Tennessee Poet Laureate for life by House Joint Resolution 250 of the Ninetieth General Assembly, in 1970; and

WHEREAS, Pek was inducted into the prestigious United Poets Laureate International and the group specially recognized his enormous contribution to poetry by bestowing on him their highest honor, a crown of golden laurels; and

WHEREAS, it is fitting that on this sad occasion we pause in our deliberations to honor the memory of Richard M. "Pek" Gunn, Poet of the People; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE NINETY-NINTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING, That we honor the memory of Richard M. "Pek" Gunn and express our deepest condolences to his family and friends. Good-bye old friend, we will sorely miss seeing you in the legislative halls but we know that heaven has gained a good storyteller.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.